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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to assess preservice elementary education teachers' knowledge of the functions of the U.S. Government. The "High School Subject Tests: American Government," developed by Scott, Foresman and Company for use with high school students, was elememtary education teachers' knowledge of the functions of the U.S. government. The "High administered during four consecutive semesters to 130 elementary education majors enrolled in the undergraduate social studies methods course in a southern university. Consisting of 50 multiple-choice items, the test was categorized into the following nine content areas: (1) principles of government; (2) guarantees of liberty; (3) American symbols and political traditions; (4) governmental powers; (5) law-making and the amendment process; (6) duties and qualifications of federal officers; (7) branches of government; (8) presidential succession and appointment; and (9) elections and voting procedures. While several items required recall of specific terminology, most responses involved an understanding of the political processes and U.S. Constitutional principles. While preservice teachers in this sample scored slightly lower than the average high school student, performance was best on the content area related to guarantees of liberty and poorest on that related to governmental powers. Student performance was evaluated and presented in tables detailing the percentage of correct responses by content area. It is concluded that these students would have difficulty explaining to elementary students how our government works. An eight-item bibliography is provided. (GEA)

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Preservice Elementary Education Majors' Knowledge of American Government

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Abstract

One hundred thirty elementary education majors were administered a standardized test to estimate their knowledge of American government. Students responded correctly to about 53% of the items. Student performance was best on the content area related to guarantees of liberty. Performance was poorest on the content area related to governmental powers. It was concluded that most of these students will have difficulty explaining to elementary students how our government works.

Preservice Elementary Education

Majors' Knowledge of American Government

Much attention is paid to the political attitudes, preferences, and perspectives of American citizens. This attention is understandable in light of the assumption that attitudes determine behavior, i.e., choices in the voting booth (Furnham & Gunter, 1987). Because of the media attention to pre-election positions, Americans have become accustomed to knowing the outcome of most elections before the first ballot is cast. In fact, a major election with an unexpected outcome has become the exception rather than the rule in recent years.

In contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to the political knowledge of those same voters. It seems almost as if we are concerned only with the choices which voters make rather than with the integrity of the information and background knowledge on which those choices are based. This lack of attention certainly cannot be due to a solid confidence that Americans do in fact know enough about the democratic process and about national and international affairs to make rational informed decisions. On the contrary, a number of recent national reports and best selling books point to the opposite conclusion: Americans are culturally, geographically, and politically illiterate. As usual, when we discover a national problem of this nature, the blame is placed squarely on the public school system. The consensus seems to be that if public school teachers knew

more, the American public would also know more.

A number of research studies provide support for the assumption that public school teachers' knowledge of the social sciences is not what it should be (e.g., Diem, 1982; Kleg, 1985; Larkins, Hawkins, & McKinney, 1984). Because of the importance of political science education in the development of rational, informed, and participating citizens, the purpose of the present study was to measure the general knowledge of American government of preservice elementary teachers.

There has been relatively little research devoted specifically to the knowledge of American government of either teachers or students, but the research available indicates that problems exist. McLoughlin, Sametz, and Strieb (1983) identified serious weaknesses in preservice teachers' knowledge of basic American rights such as freedom of speech, religion, and press. There are also indications that Americans are not alone in this problem. Furnham and Gunter (1987) reported results from a study of the political knowledge of 453 British adolescents. They found that although the British students seemed to be fairly well informed about the identity of political leaders, the students were poorly informed about how the political system works and about the policies of particular political parties. Although the authors made no specific references to the role of teacher knowledge, they recommended that more attention be paid to

political science education in the schools to produce politically literate citizens.

Procedures

Sample

The sample consisted of 130 elementary education majors enrolled in the undergraduate social studies method course in a southern university during four consecutive semesters. Nearly all of the students were white females. Most were juniors or seniors. The university is the largest in the state and was founded as a teacher college.

Instrument

The instrument selected to assess the preservice teachers' knowledge was developed by Scott, Foresman, and Company (Gatta, 1980) for use with high school students. The test, the High School Subject Tests: American Government, consists of 50 multiple-choice items. The norm group for the test was a nationwide sample of 1851 public and private high school students who had completed a course in American government. The Kuder-Richardson-20 reliability estimate for the test is .88. The 50 items are categorized into the following nine content areas: (a) principles of government, (b) guarantees of liberty, (c) American symbols and political traditions, (d) governmental powers, (e) law-making and the amendment process, (f) duties and qualifications of federal officers, (g) branches of government, (h) presidential succession and appointment, and (i) elections and

voting procedures. Most of the categories contained four or five items. There are, however, 10 items devoted to the principles of government, making that category 20% of the test. The authors of the test report that extensive efforts were made to ensure that the test items and the objectives represent accurately the content areas taught in American high schools.

An item-by-item examination of the test indicates that the test reflects a wide variety of political science content. While several of the items require the student to recall specific terminology, most of the responses involve an understanding of the political processes and Constitutional principles which provide the foundations for American government. A minimal number of items could be considered trivial (e.g., an item which requires the student to recognize an incorrect display of the American flag). Overall, the test seems to reflect knowledge which would contribute to a citizen's capability for rational and informed participation in American government.

The tests were administered by the regular instructors of the classes. No names or student identification numbers were used on the answer sheets. Students were told that there would be no extra credit for doing well on the test and no penalty for a low score. Observation during the testing sessions and conversations with students after the test indicated that they took the task seriously and attempted to do well on the test.

Results

The frequency of total test scores and the frequency of correct responses by item are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The scores on the 50-item test ranged from a low of 11 to a high of 42. The mean was 26.42 (53% correct) with a standard deviation of 7.40. This mean represents the 44th percentile for high school students. The mean for high school students was 27.3 with a standard deviation of 8.8. This indicates that the preservice teachers in this sample scored slightly lower than the average for high school students.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

The first content area, principles of government, consists of 10 items. Students performed best on one of two items related to the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence (84% correct). However, only 46% of the students responded correctly to a second item related to the Declaration of Independence. Seventy-two percent of the students knew about the Articles of Confederation. Sixty-five percent knew the term popular sovereignty. Students performed poorly on the following items: (a) limited government (55% correct), (b) federal system (49% correct), (c) republican form of government (39% correct), (d) democratic form of government (29% correct), and (e) judicial review (29% correct). See Tables 2 and 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

The second content area, American symbols and political traditions, consists of six items. Ninety-two percent of the students recognized the Great Seal of the United States. Seventy-six percent of the students recognized how to correctly display the American flag. Sixty-two percent could correctly recognize the role of the military in the American political tradition. Fifty-nine percent knew what the Great Compromise was. Only 39% knew that state governments can not establish nonrepublican forms of government. See Tables 2 and 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

The third content area, governmental powers, consisted of four items. Students performed poorly on all four. Only 52% of the students knew about reserved powers, and 51% knew about delegated powers. Forty-three percent knew about separation of power. Only 29% knew that the federal and state governments share powers (concurrent). See Tables 2 and 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

The fourth content area, branches of government, contains

eight items. Eighty-eight percent of the students recognized the system of checks and balances. Only 44% knew that the House of Representatives elects the President in the event that no candidate receives a majority. Forty-two percent knew that a grand jury issues indictments. Thirty-two percent did not recognize a check on the executive branch. Only 26% knew that the Senate advises and consents on treaties. Twenty-six percent knew that the Senate acts as the jury in impeachment cases; while only 19% knew that the House of Representatives has the power to impeach. See Tables 2 and 6.

Insert Table 6 about here

The fifth content area, guarantees of liberty, consists of four items. Seventy-two percent of the students responded correctly to an item related to the Bill of Rights. Sixty-nine percent responded correctly to the concept of eminent domain. Fifty-eight percent knew the concept of self-incrimination. Only 47% knew that the guarantees of individual liberties are found in the first 10 Amendments. See Tables 2 and 7.

Insert Table 7 about here

The sixth content area, duties and qualifications of federal officers, consists of five items. Seventy-five percent of the

students knew that the presiding officer of the House of Representatives is the Speaker of the House. Sixty-four percent knew the qualifications for a United States representative. Sixty-one percent knew that the President must be a natural-born citizen. Only 52% knew that the Vice President plays roles in two branches of government. Only 32% knew that qualifications for Supreme Court justices and other federal judges are not specified in the Constitution. See Tables 2 and 8.

Insert Table 8 about here

The seventh content area, law-making and the amendment process, consists of four items. Students knew that the President cannot veto a bill by appealing for a public vote (67% correct). Only 59% knew that all revenue bills originate in the House of Representatives. Fifty-five percent knew that there is no amendment clarifying a president's power to declare and wage war. Only 24% knew that three-fourths of the states are required to ratify an amendment. See Tables 2 and 9.

Insert Table 9 about here

The eighth content area, presidential succession and appointment, also has four items. Fifty-six percent of the students knew that the President does not appoint representatives.

Fifty-three percent knew that Congress approved Ford's appointment to the office of Vice President. Forty-two percent knew that governors appoint replacement senators. Only 40% knew that the Speaker of the House is second in line to the presidency. See Tables 2 and 10.

Insert Table 10 about here

Student performance was best in the ninth content area, elections and voting procedures (see Tables 2 and 11). Over 80% of the students responded correctly to three of the five items. Students recognized a "split ticket"; knew that the people do not vote on the ratification of treaties; and knew that voting is a civic duty, a basic freedom, and active participation in the democratic process. Surprisingly, only 47% knew that 18 year-olds can vote, and only 42% recognized a sample ballot for a general election as opposed to ballots for a primary election or a special referendum.

Insert Table 11 about here

Discussion

The preservice teachers in this sample demonstrated a lack of basic information about our political system. Because most of these students were juniors or seniors, it is probably safe to

assume that most of them had completed their core requirements such as American history and government prior to taking the test. It is unlikely, therefore, that their knowledge of American government will undergo any substantial improvement before they enter the teaching profession.

The situation would not be quite so grim if we could depend on the content presented in elementary social studies textbooks to compensate for the gaps in teacher knowledge. Unfortunately, most current textbooks seem to offer little of substantive value in citizenship education (Larkins, Hawkins, & Gilmore, 1987).

How can we expect elementary teachers to assume responsibility for the transmission of the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the perpetuation of our American political system? One viable solution begins with the instructors of social studies methods courses. If students enrolled in these courses can be led to understand the importance of increasing one's own knowledge in the area of American government, they will be more likely to pass on not only that knowledge but also an attitude which reflects the importance of citizens being informed. Personal experience has shown that these changes are possible and that the effects, according to student reports, are, in fact, long term.

An alternative solution involves the coursework required of elementary teachers at most teacher preparation institutions. An analysis of the college transcripts of over 3,000 education

graduates from 17 southern universities revealed that almost half of the students took no courses in political science (Galambos, Cornett, & Spitler, 1985). Political science was not required of the students that participated in our study. Galambos et al. also noted that elementary education majors are more likely to fulfill their social science requirements with history or psychology than either political science or economics. Because university degree requirements in education are often tied very closely to minimum state certification requirements, changes in either university core requirements or state certification requirements could result in elementary teachers who have been exposed to more content background in political science.

Other solutions to this problem need to be explored by teacher educators who are committed to the importance of systematic citizenship education in the elementary grades and beyond.

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Table 1

Frequency of Correct Responses

Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
11	2	1.5	1.5
13	1	.8	2.3
14	2	1.5	3.8
16	6	4.6	8.5
17	3	2.3	10.8
18	6	4.6	15.4
19	4	3.1	18.5
20	3	2.3	20.8
21	10	7.7	28.5
22	6	4.6	33.1
23	5	3.8	36.9
24	10	7.7	44.6
25	6	4.6	49.2
26	8	6.2	55.4
27	6	4.6	60.0
28	5	3.8	63.8
29	4	3.1	66.9
30	3	2.3	69.2
31	4	3.1	72.3
32	2	1.5	73.8
33	7	5.4	79.2
34	4	3.1	82.3
35	4	3.1	85.4
36	4	3.1	88.5
37	2	1.5	90.0
38	6	4.6	94.6
40	2	1.5	96.2
41	3	2.3	98.5
42	2	1.5	100.0

Mean=26.42
Standard deviation=7.40

Table 2
Frequency of Correct Responses by Item

Item	Content Area	No. of Correct Responses	Percent Correct
1	Principles of Gov't	50	38.5
2	Principles of Gov't	38	29.2
3	Principles of Gov't	93	71.5
4	Symbols & Pol. Traditions	76	58.5
5	Symbols & Pol. Traditions	80	61.5
6	Principles of Gov't	85	65.4
7	Principles of Gov't	71	54.6
8	Principles of Gov't	63	48.5
9	Governmental Powers	56	43.1
10	Branches, Checks, & Duties	114	87.7
11	Branches, Checks, & Duties	41	31.5
12	Guarantees of Liberty	61	46.9
13	Guarantees of Liberty	75	57.7
14	Guarantees of Liberty	89	68.5
15	Principles of Gov't	75	57.7
16	Guarantees of Liberty	94	72.3
17	Branches, Checks, & Duties	34	26.2
18	Governmental Powers	66	50.8
19	Duties & Qualifications	98	75.4
20	Duties & Qualifications	68	52.3
21	Branches, Checks, & Duties	33	25.4
22	Branches, Checks, & Duties	57	43.8
23	Branches, Checks, & Duties	48	36.9
24	Branches, Checks, & Duties	25	19.2
25	Lawmaking & Amendment Process	77	59.2
26	Presidential Succession	73	56.2
27	Duties & Qualifications	79	60.8
28	Duties & Qualifications	83	63.8
29	Presidential Succession	55	42.3
30	Presidential Succession	52	40.0
31	Lawmaking & Amendment Process	87	66.9
32	Lawmaking & Amendment Process	31	23.8
33	Lawmaking & Amendment Process	71	54.6
34	Elections & Voting Procedures	61	46.9
35	Elections & Voting Procedures	54	41.5
36	Elections & Voting Procedures	109	83.8
37	Principles of Gov't	38	29.2
38	Duties & Qualifications	42	32.3
39	Symbols & Political Traditions	51	39.2
40	Elections & Voting Procedures	104	80.0
41	Elections & Voting Procedures	111	85.4
42	Governmental Powers	67	51.5
43	Governmental Powers	37	28.5
44	Symbols & Political Traditions	53	40.8
45	Branches, Checks, & Duties	55	42.3
46	Presidential Succession	69	53.1
47	Symbols & Political Traditions	119	91.5
48	Principles of Gov't	60	46.2
49	Principles of Gov't	109	83.8
50	Symbols & Political Traditions	99	76.2

Table 3

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Principles of Government

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	4	3.1	3.1
2	4	3.1	6.2
3	15	11.5	17.7
4	25	19.2	36.9
5	26	20.0	56.9
6	18	13.8	70.8
7	20	15.4	86.2
8	16	12.3	98.5
9	1	.8	99.2
10	1	.8	100.0
Total	130	100.0	

Table 4

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: American Symbols and Political Traditions

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	3	2.3	2.3
1	6	4.6	6.9
2	14	10.8	17.7
3	31	23.8	41.5
4	41	31.5	73.1
5	23	17.7	90.8
6	12	9.2	100.0
Total	130	100.0	

Table 5

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Governmental Powers

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	19	14.6	14.6
1	37	28.5	43.1
2	40	30.8	73.8
3	27	20.8	94.6
4	7	5.4	100.0
Total	130	100.0	

Table 6

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Branches of Government

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	1	.8	.8
1	19	14.6	15.4
2	25	19.2	34.6
3	33	25.4	60.0
4	29	22.3	82.3
5	16	12.3	94.6
6	6	4.6	99.2
7	1	.8	100.0
8	0	.0	
Total	130	100.0	

Table 7

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Guarantees of Liberty

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	6	4.6	4.6
1	17	13.1	17.7
2	40	30.8	48.5
3	46	35.4	83.8
4	21	16.2	100.0
Total	130	100.0	

Table 8

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Duties and Qualifications of Federal Officers

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	3	2.3	2.3
1	13	10.0	12.3
2	38	29.2	41.5
3	35	26.9	68.5
4	29	22.3	90.8
5	12	9.2	100.0
Total	130	100.0	

Table 9

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Law-Making and the Amendment Process

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	15	11.5	11.5
1	29	22.3	33.8
2	36	27.7	61.5
3	35	26.9	88.5
4	15	11.5	100.0
Total	130	100.0	

Table 10

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Presidential Succession and Appointment

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	17	13.1	13.1
1	31	23.8	36.9
2	43	33.1	70.0
3	24	18.5	88.5
4	15	11.5	100.0
Total	130	100.0	

Table 11

Percentage of Correct Responses by Content Area: Elections and Voting Procedures

No. of Correct Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	4	3.1	3.1
1	7	5.4	8.5
2	13	10.0	18.5
3	38	29.2	47.7
4	48	36.9	84.6
5	20	15.4	100.0
Total	130	100.0	